

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 174 283

JC 790 449

AUTHOR Kirby, Emily B.
 TITLE Average Age of Oakton Students in Fall 1978.
 INSTITUTION Oakton Community Coll., Morton Grove, Ill.
 PUB DATE 26 Mar 79
 NOTE 10p.
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Age; *Age Differences; Age Groups; *College Credits; Community Colleges; Enrollment Trends; *Junior Colleges; *Junior College Students; Nontraditional Students

ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that the average age of community college students is increasing and colleges should adjust their policies accordingly. In an effort to investigate this assertion, the average age of Oakton Community College students enrolled during the fall 1978 semester was calculated. The relationship between student age and number of credit hours was also examined. Birth year was plotted against number of credits for 413 students (approximately 6% of Oakton enrollment). The age of the sample members ranged from 17 to 75 years, and these students enrolled during fall 1978 for 0 to 19 credit hours. The median age of the sample was 21; the modal age was 19; and the mean age was 25.8 years. The median and the modal calculations favored the hypothesis that enrolling students were younger or remaining at the traditional age; the mean favored the competing hypothesis that older students were enrolling. Reviewing credit hours in relation to student age, it was discovered that students under 25 accounted for 63.7% of the sample's credit hour enrollment. Nineteen-year-olds enrolled for more credit hours than any other age group. (DR)

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ED174283

AVERAGE AGE OF OAKTON STUDENTS IN FALL 1978

Report #1, S379

Emily B. Kirby, Ph.D.
Director of Instructional
Research and Evaluation
Oakton Community College

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March 26, 1979

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AVERAGE AGE OF OAKTON STUDENTS
IN
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Everyone knows that college students have been getting older. But is this true? And if college students are getting older, what changes will this bring for educators?

Problem:

Much has recently been written about effects of increases in the average age of community college students. It has often been suggested that community colleges examine their enrollments to determine the average age of their present students. Such information, valuable for general documentation purposes, is essential for educational planning. The latter is closely related to, and requires information about, the age and experience of students. Age, of course, gives some rather good clues to experience.

Our objective was to determine the average age of Oakton Community College students during the fall 1978 semester. The relationship between student age and number of credit hours taken was also examined.

Method:

The Sample. Oakton Community College enrollment in fall 1978 was 6,382 students. A random sample of 420 of these students (6.5%) was selected. Using the general approach of Sheldon and Grafton (1978) birth year was plotted against number of credits for students in the sample. Data was gathered for 413 members of our sample (98.3%). Age of sample members ranged between 17 and 75 years. These students enrolled during fall 1978 for 0 to 19 credit hours.

Results:

The "Average" ages were determined: the median age--the age of the middle student when ranked by birth year; the modal age--the age of the largest birth year group; and the mean age--the arithmetic average calculated by summing all sample student ages and dividing by the number of students. These calculations yielded the results given below:

Figure 1

Average Age Data: OCC Sample, Fall 1978

Average Age in Years		Calculation
Median	= 21	$N/2 = \frac{206.5}{413}$
Mode	= 19	None = 83
Mean	= 25.8	$fx/N = \frac{10641}{413}$

As can be seen, the disparity between the three averages was great. Part of this is due to the ways in which the averages are calculated, and to their relative stability as measures of central tendency. Relative assurance of accuracy is granted by coincidence of the mean, mode, and median. This did not occur with regard to the sampling of fall 1978 enrolled students at OCC. We found that the median and mode favored the hypothesis that students were growing younger, or were remaining at the traditional age, while the mean favored the competing hypothesis that students were growing older.

Our approach was to calculate confidence limits for both the 95 and 99% intervals. The confidence limits let us know how sure we can be that our sample mean is close to the population mean. In English, how sure can we be that the age of our 413 students has an arithmetic average similar to that of the 6,382 fall 1978 students? Figure 2 presents the results of this examination:

Figure 2

Confidence Limits for OCC Sample Fall 1978 Mean Age

Category	Years
Sample Mean Age	25.8
95% Confidence Interval	23.3--28.3
99% Confidence Interval	22.5--29.1

As another check on the adequacy of our random sample, we examined the Admissions and Enrollment data for fall 1978 and fall 1977 which provided means for the total OCC enrollment. These data are presented on page 4 (see Figure 3).

The mean age of OCC students in fall 1978 according to the two sets of figures (Figures 2 and 3) seems to be slightly above the middle twenties. From this we would conclude that OCC students are getting older. But what has been presented so far is by no means the entire story. The arithmetic mean is very sensitive to extreme data: a single subject 70 years old would pull the mean a disproportionate distance upward. In our

sample there were 17 students (4.1%) age 50 or above. There were no sample members younger than 17 years, and only 3 (.7%) who were 17. Thus our sample appears to have been pulled from normalcy--where mean, median, and mode share the same value--by the older students in the sample. In addition, our arithmetic mean would not differ from that in the enrollment statistics for the entire fall 1978 body as indicated by our confidence interval checks.

We still wanted to continue our examination because we were not convinced that all pertinent variables had been looked at. What we were assured was that the mean age of OCC students was at the mid-twenties in fall 1978.

Figure 3

Admissions and Enrollment Report
OCC Mean Ages of Students in Fall 1978 and Fall 1977^a.

Category Mean Age in Years of	Year	
	1977	1978
Men	24	24
Women	29	29
All Students	27	27

a. Oakton Community College Admissions and Enrollment Report, Fall 1978, page 24.

Turning to the relationship between credit hours and age, we found: .

Figure 4
Age and Credit Hours for OCC Fall 1978 Sample

Category	Age		Credit Hours	
	#	%	#	%
Under 20	145	35.0	1316	46.5
Under 25	263	63.7	2156	76.4
	+118		+840	
Under 75	413	100.0	2820	100.0
	+150		+664	

The largest group of students, 83 (20%) were 19 years old. Alone they took (26.4%) more than a quarter of the sample's credit hours. Students under 20 took almost half (46.5%) of the sample's credit hour enrollment; while students under 25 accounted for over three-fifths (63.7%) of the sample's credit hour enrollment. Thus the two younger groups of students--those under 20, and those under 25--remain important educational consumers of community college services. The single most important group, the traditional student group, particularly 19 years old, is more numerous and enrolls for more credit hours than any other.

One additional finding concerning enrollment pattern may be of interest. Thirty percent of the sample (124) enrolled for three credit hours only. This group spanned the entire age range from 17 to 75 years. Another

sixth of the sample (66; 16.0%) enrolled for six credit hours; the ages in the group ranged between 18 and 56 years. Therefore, the two part-time student groups accounted for 190 sample members (46%)--almost half of the sample. The credits they generated amounted to:

Figure 5
Part-time Credit Hours for OCC Fall 1978 Sample

Credit Hours	Students		Total Credit Hours	
	#	%	#	%
3	124	30.0	372	13.2
6	66	16.0	396	19.0
	+190		+768	
9	30	7.3	270	10.0
	+220		+1,038	

Part-time students taking one, two, or three credit hour courses, in this sample, accounted for nearly two-fifths (36.8%) of the credits generated. The part-time students included over half (53.3%) of the sample.

Conclusion and Summary:

This replication of a study by Sheldon and Grafton (1978) confirmed and extended their findings. Confirmation occurred regarding their finding that, "In spite of the growing interest in the 'older student' pattern, there does not exist in community college education any major shift... the majority of students are rather young." (Page 39), Oakton Community College students are similar to those sampled by Sheldon and Grafton in California.

The study was extended by examination of patterns of part-time enrollment. Groups for whom planning is needed at OCC include: traditional students in the under 20, and 20--25 year old range; and part-time students enrolling in one, two, or three credit hour courses regardless of age.

These two groups account for substantial portions of OCC's clientele.

There is overlap among them in that some younger students are part-time students.

Considering all the data presented here, there is little reason to expect that OCC students in the 1980s will differ markedly from those of the 1970s in age distribution.

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